bid and response

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by BenevolentErrancy

Summary

Captured and incapacitated, Xie Lian has been enduring an unchanging routine of confusion and pain until he finds himself lost in a wager to the fierce Ghost King, Hua Cheng.

The Ghost King, meanwhile, has found himself in possession of his god — an undying god who has had a nail driven through his skull with no way to escape. Hua Cheng has no choice but to remove it.

Xie Lian understands very little of this.

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Part 1.5: a Bonus Chapter for Part One, rewriting the final scene through Xie Lian's POV

Notes

Got a request to show Xie Lian's POV during the last scene of "coffin nails as collateral" so this is his experience during Hua Cheng's arrival to the Gambler's Den.

This probably won't make much sense without reading Part One, so I'd recommend doing that first. However if you HAVE read Part One but are not in the mood for more whump or prefer to imagine Xie Lian's thought process for yourself, then feel free to skip this and move on to "fixing the match, capping the hand" for the recovery portion of this story

Xie Lian was curled beneath a table, beneath a pair of boots, pressed against the floor of a ghostly gambling hall and he couldn't breathe.

No, he could breathe, but he felt like he was breathing too much. Or too little? Too little air. Too much of something else, something thick and dark and choking.

A ghost's aura filled the room, and it felt like black fists around his lungs. With every breath it filled him, with every exhale it scraped him raw. It wanted to press against his eyes, and ears, and clench around his skin until he was rendered into something small and feeble. There was a time when such an aura might make him take notice but would not have affected him so. A time when he'd had the power to match it. A time when simply the wrong smell, the wrong touch, a little too much colour didn't send him crashing into crisis.

He wasn't the only one feeling it though. The clattering of dice on the table overhead had stilled, the senseless rumble of voices had ceased, and it had been replaced with rank fear. No one spoke, no one even moved except to flinch or cringe. Whatever could make a room feel like this was not something you wanted to notice you.

There had been a time in Xie Lian's life when he had drawn notice. When he had paraded and flaunted himself in robes of gold, when he had possessed hundreds, thousands of temples to his name, when he had stood and led armies. He had been worshipped by his citizens, had pleased the gods, and had drawn the ire of a monster in white. Those days, at least, were gone. He was something smaller now, abridged, parts gouged out by choice or by circumstance.

Lying curled beneath boots, in a thin robe more grey than white, it was a relief to know that there was no reason for an aura like this to notice him in the least. All he had to do was endure the weight of it, and eventually it would end, as all things did.

As he was, he couldn't see what creature was causing the disturbance but he also didn't need to, not when he had heard the fearful cluck of "*Chengzhu*" from the table above. So this was Hua Cheng. This was the ghost to whom the cultivator had wanted him brought.

This was White No-Face.

Except it wasn't. Of course it wasn't. White No-Face was long dead, except for those broken portions of Xie Lian's brain that couldn't always remember that, the bits that forgot if he had eaten yesterday but remembered the exact feelings of the Calamity's hands against his skin or a smooth mask against his face.

The problem was that Xie Lian had experienced many things in his long life. He had fought with, had defeated, and in turn been defeated by many, many creatures. Never though had he felt an aura like this. This was something ancient, and deadly, and furious beyond measure. This was a fury that was not meant to be contained within a single being, not even a single lifetime. It was a power that Xie Lian had only ever felt matched by one creature, and that one had worn white and ensured that Xie Lian was slaughtered a hundred times over in the span of an evening.

And the man wanted Xie Lian gambled away to this creature?

At what point did it even matter if it was White No-Face or not? Because while the aura was not identical, it was near enough, and Xie Lian's brain was good these days at filling the holes that had been dug into it with the most wretched memories it could dredge up.

All he could do was quake beneath the boots which in turn were the only things that seemed to be holding him together, pressing his terror and confusion into a singular shape. They least covered him, shielded him from this killing aura, until even they were gone and there was a hand in his hair instead, pulling. He wanted to beg, he wanted to lie down, he wanted to curl up like a worm in the cool, dark soil until the burning light of this Ghost City and the burning hatred of this ghost had vanished. He wanted to lie down until everything aged and crumbled and died around him and he was the only thing left. He wanted. But he had no words, he barely had coherent thought beyond desecrated temples and lost ghosts and smooth masks, so he moaned softly and was moved.

He tried to keep up. He tried so hard. He scrambled to find his feet, pushing his toes under him, but it was an effort of coordination unlike any Xie Lian could name. He had been a martial god, once. He had run across uncountable miles, day after day, carrying rain in an effort to bring reprieve to his people, and now he couldn't even crawl.

He couldn't even feel bad about that. The only feeling he had room for, between the confusion and the pain and the burn of colours and the crush of a killing aura, was relief when the movement ended and he could collapse again.

The floor, at least, was cool. It was tile. Even in Ghost City, tile was apparently just tile. Simple and unadorned and undemanding. It lay still, it allowed everything and everyone to walk above it, and offered no complaint. It didn't mind Xie Lian curling up on it. It wouldn't rebuke him or hurt him. He could feel the man's living warmth next to him. He could hear the snarl of a furious voice overheard. He had seen, briefly, before curling in on himself, a blur of colour and shape that had been a crowd of patrons, all watching this spectacle.

If he tried to think about it all, Xie Lian would certainly die. His head would split, starting from the nail, and surely he would just fall to pieces. So he didn't think. He let it happen. Either the man would take him away and his torment would be as it ever was, or this Ghost King would claim him, and the torment may be new or may not be. It was pointless to speculate. It was pointless to care.

So Xie Lian didn't. He worked very hard to ensure he didn't.

"Lord Crimson Rain, I wish all those who spurned my offers of service to be struck dead in their beds," came the man's voice, and it made Xie Lian press his eyes shut all the tighter.

The people that spurned his offers were just normal people. Xie Lian knew the region, knew the people, or he had before the nail had stolen everything but scraps. They were just people. Poor, trying to get by on the edge of a mountain with coarse, rocky soil. If this man won, did that mean these people, who likely couldn't have afforded a tradesman even if they had wanted one, would be slaughtered? That was more galling than anything else Xie Lian had experienced today. If he was killed or beaten or used, at least he could fade away from it. His

brain was so damaged that nothing really mattered anymore, and it wasn't like he could die. These people, they didn't deserve it though, to have a life snuffed out by one person's petty grievances and resentment.

Please don't, were the words that sat on his tongue, but he couldn't find a way to press them out any further. His lips shifted uselessly, and the words faded in his brain even as he thought them. His words rarely did any good, even before the nail — he was a god of misfortune after all — but there was a unique frustration in knowing that the deaths of many were even now being negotiated above his head and the only thing that kept him from trying to help was a pathetic little hole, no bigger than a finger, in the back of his head. He could cry, were emotions not too far away to touch.

"And if you lose?" demanded a voice somewhere overheard, proving that Xie Lian had spent so long trying to arrange two simple words that he was already too late. Always too late. Words dripping from him like rain water from a bamboo hat.

"This is a demon I captured." The man said this, and it was accompanied with a kick.

The kick felt like nothing, nor did the words, he felt nothing but he mourned silently. He couldn't do this. He couldn't lie here and listen to people being killed with words above him. He didn't want to. He couldn't. Not again. Not when he had battlefields that lived in his mind and a plague stamped across his heart, not when a Gilded Banquet was carved beneath his fingers and a poor, nameless ghost had been torn apart by the resentful dead he had called upon for his own pathetic vengeance. How could he possibly fit more into himself, after all that?

He had to stop this.

He couldn't stop this. He may as well be bound to an altar, for all the agency he had in this moment.

So he let go. He had to. He would be woken again, when someone intended to use him for something, that was a certainty, so what did it matter where his mind drifted in the interim?

What brought him back was not words or even hands, but the rattle of dice.

The rest of the room was so silent that the clatter seemed to fill the entire space, fill Xie Lian's entire head.

The devastation of an community would be decided by that innocuous little sound. His own devastation was guaranteed, it was only a question of by whose hands, but the community had a chance.

If they were relying on Xie Lian's luck, all he could do was mourn and apologise.

The rattling stopped. The man made a pleased noise, and Xie Lian considered throwing up. Or jumping up and grabbing the ghost, begging him to reconsider, or maybe just slamming his head against the ground until he was freed from his senses before this stress ate him alive like locusts.

But his hands were locked behind his back and his legs were locked in tight, stiff knots of pain and he could do nothing.

Then there was movement. The vague sight of sleek, black boots adorned with silver in Xie Lian's periphery. Who could it be but the Ghost King? He stepped to the table at which the man had rolled his dice. There was no grand flourish, no fierce rattling, just silence and a soft chinking as they bounced against the table.

Xie Lian had no way of knowing what numbers had been rolled, what numbers decided the fates of so many lives, but he knew the results because the man was suddenly terrified. Gone was the unflinching taskmaster. Gone was Xie Lian's merciless, sneering keeper. All that was left was a scared man who was scrambling backwards, abandoning Xie Lian wholly in his attempts to get away.

Good.

That was all Xie Lian could feel. Couldn't even encompass what about this, exactly, was good. All he felt was profound relief. He let himself rest more fully against the floor, while he listened to the Ghost King snarl and command the man be dragged away. Xie Lian would be moved when it was time, and there was nothing left for him to worry about.

The ghost had won and the people were safe and Xie Lian could rest until he couldn't.

The ghost's voice was deep, angry, dark, and it sluiced against Xie Lian's brain like a black tide. He vaguely knew he was speaking to the man, threatening him, but it was impersonal and distant to Xie Lian. The only word that seemed to rise to the surface of that tide, crisp and clear and damning, was "*scram*".

An order, as obvious as it could be. It was delivered by a being used to getting exactly what he demanded when he demanded it; the killing intent that followed it punched whatever air Xie Lian had out of his lungs. There was a clamour as everyone else in the room scrambled to obey. Every muscle that had started to ease in Xie Lian's body tensed once more as he too tried to obey, confused, not sure if he should leave as well or if that would be considered running away, because running away got him beaten and tossed to the ground and pressed into over and over and he couldn't do that again, not now, not with Ghost City still shredding his senses and the dice rattling around in his head, he didn't know what to do, what to obey, how to obey, so his muscles clenched and shook and his body could do nothing but tremble. Surely the worst of any possible options.

A moment's pause in which silence seemed to rush in to fill the suddenly yawning, empty space of the Gambler's Den. A moment's cruel hesitation, as it gave Xie Lian just enough time to consider how badly this was about to go, giving him just enough time to brace, without anywhere near the time to stop it.

And then the ghost was moving. Kneeling down. Pressing closing. Reaching.

Xie Lian locked his teeth so he didn't start gagging. The man had been mad enough when he had thrown up on a busy street, he didn't want to think about what would happen if he made a mess of a king's place of business. Or his boots.

Hands touched him. Reached around him, pressed against his sore arms, and Xie Lian couldn't help it, he flinched.

His heart was beating so fast that he was getting dizzy from that alone as fear and regret flooded him.

With the hands behind him, it would be so easy for the Ghost King to reach up, to press his hand against the nail, to force compliance, to—

As he flinched, so did the ghost's hands, whipping back— winding up? To strike? To punish the transgression? For disobeying, being difficult, forgetting his place, for—

"*I'm sorry.*" The first words he had been able to find. They were easy words to find, always waiting under his tongue, the best he could do most days to try to minimise what was about to happen. Sometimes it helped. Sometimes it made things worse. No way to know now. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

Everything already hurt. He just wanted things to hurt a little less than they needed to. He knew what to expect from the man and knew nothing about Hua Cheng the Ghost King and would do anything to be given just a few kè to let the world settle and start making sense again.

The Ghost King's response was nothing he could have predicted.

"Gege, may this one loosen your binds?"

At first he didn't even understand the words. Language could be hard to track, it seemed to always be racing a few paces ahead of him, so the more complex or unpredictable the harder it was to make sense of it. He could never have expected such a gentle tone. He could never have expected such a soft, gentle question.

Not a demand. Not a reprimand. Not even a request. A question that seemed to require no specific response. And for something that Xie Lian had been wanting so fiercely that it was a need that seemed to burn through his very bones.

Was this a trick? A trap? In preparation for something worse?

Xie Lian thought he should pay attention, be wary, be *careful* but it was too much thinking, too abstract, when what he wanted was *right there*, it was *right there and being offered* and he would take the chance, he would risk any pain or repercussion for even the chance of Ruoye finally being freed from his arms.

So he said, "Please." He said it with every bit of conviction he could muster in his vague, crumbling body.

Again. "Please." Because what if he hadn't said it properly the first time?

Please. Words didn't always come out right.

Please. In case Hua Cheng didn't think he meant it.

Please. As if that could convince his luck to change, just this once.

Please. As if Jun Wu might ease up his shackles for a bare moment, just long enough for Xie Lian to end this.

He was crying. Probably. Sometimes it felt like his brain was floating in a tidal pool, murky and rough, exposed to the elements and fed on by fish. He felt adrift and wet in a way that would never really dry. Sometimes it felt like those tidal pools were overflowing, drowning him, and sometimes it was a surprise to find out that they had overflown down his cheeks, wetting his face, not just in his mind. But he blinked and could feel it collect on his lashes, the salt water stinging and making the world swim.

He heard the ghost move, slow, like a predator creeping, and suddenly Xie Lian couldn't take the uncertainty anymore. He straightened — and even that little movement after everything he had been through today was enough to almost cause him to faint to the floor — and blinked away the tears, trying to focus on the ghost.

It was his first good look at him. Deathly pale skin, piercing black eyes, a mane of black hair falling around robes of the most vibrant red. It was as if lion had been given the shape of a man.

What was more startling though was his expression.

Xie Lian had gotten very used to expressions of contempt. Of revulsion, hunger, hatred, lust, derision. None of that was here. If anything, Xie Lian would almost call him wary which was such an unbelievable thought that he had to blink more, in case his eyes were tricking him. But no, Hua Cheng seemed to be watching him like he was a wild animal that might bite. He moved slowly, shifting around Xie Lian as if worried he would spook.

Xie Lian didn't move. He had flinched once, and if his new master was choosing to be slow and wary that was better than fast and fierce. Even when Hua Cheng had inched his way behind Xie Lian, he forced himself to stay still.

It wasn't as if Hua Cheng could do anything to him that hadn't already been done.

It might be better, at least, if it was slow and wary. Anything had to be better than fast and fierce.

Instead there were hands on his wrists again. The skin was hot and swollen, blood circulation destroyed by Ruoye bonds, and he was used to the man using his arms as a handhold, something to drag him around by, but that wasn't the sort of touch he felt now. It was soft. Barely a brush of skin, the ghost's so cold as to almost be comforting on his abused wrists.

Gege, may this one loosen your binds?

That's what Hua Cheng had said, but the entire thing had been so absurd that Xie Lian realised he had let it slip immediately from his head. Surely no one would actually loosen his binds like this? Not after winning him? Not with such a soft, affectionate tone in his voice?

But the cold fingers were beginning to pluck at the silk.

Xie Lian didn't dare move, in case it somehow destroyed this marvellous dream. In case it reminded Hua Cheng that there were better things to do to him than untangling silk. And it seemed to work. Time slithered back and forth like eels, never staying in one place long enough for Xie Lian to track, but it felt like, just maybe, his binds were getting somewhat looser.

And then the ghost spoke again.

"This one could cut it off faster."

The fear was so immediate and horrible that it was like being hit with a hammer, all over again. Ruoye, in pieces. Ruoye, his only friend, destroyed beyond salvation. Ruoye, in some tortured half-existence from which Xie Lian wouldn't be allowed to mend him.

Xie Lian wasn't even sure if he managed to say any words. He knew he had screamed something only because he felt it rip through his throat but he was more focused on the desperate fight to get his feet under him and get away. He couldn't stand, not really, not before the vertigo struck and threw him back to the floor with a violence that made the nail jar in his head and made everything spin and fracture worse than before. All that remained was fear, fear for Ruoye, fear for his friend. Between the fear and the thrashing dizziness, he could hardly *breathe*, could hardly—

He had to close his eyes and drop his head. He wanted to run and he couldn't even do that, he couldn't *breathe*, he was going to be ill, he couldn't do anything, he was too weak, too pathetic, a simple iron nail had stripped any illusions of strength from him more thoroughly than any divine shackle. He had never been able to save anyone and here he was now, sprawled and helpless and desperate and trying to breathe and—

"— *won't cut it.* I won't cut it. This one will only untie it. Please."

The words felt like they were coming from a thousand li away, distant and echoing and unreal, just like the ghost with the scared, gentle face seemed unreal as he inched anxiously closer.

Xie Lian couldn't have moved again even if he had wanted to. He could only sit and breath and gasp and try to claw at his brain for some idea on how to protect Ruoye in case the ghost's gentleness proved to be nothing but a lie.

But the ghost didn't move behind him this time. He stayed in front, so that all Xie Lian could see suddenly was his red-clad chest. Hua Cheng leaned closer but didn't strike out, didn't grab, didn't hurt or cut, he just reached around and once again those long, cool fingers were carefully touching Xie Lian's wrists, pulling at the silk with the utmost gentleness.

"If gege is uncomfortable, he may lean against this one," Hua Cheng murmured, again saying words that felt so bizarre as to hardly be real. Uncomfortable? Xie Lian wasn't sure what he would even be anymore if he wasn't uncomfortable. Would there be anything left of him? It

felt like removing the discomfort would be like removing the nail, that surely he would just bleed out entirely from it.

He tried to find his tongue to say something, so Hua Cheng didn't think he was ignoring him or being willful, but trying to find a way to describe any of the thoughts in his head was a challenge. "I'll get you filthy," he settled on, because that was near enough. Filth from the streets, filth from the man, filth from his leaking thoughts and shattered body and helplessness, it would stain, surely. The robes in front of him were so red and so beautiful and looked so fine and soft. If he touched them, they would surely no longer be any of those things. Better not risk it.

"Gege's presence could only ever improve these robes."

The thought of laying his head down, of feeling how soft those robes were, of curling himself up until the only thing he felt was silk and the only thing he saw was red and everything else bled away, it was too tempting. He wanted not to feel, not to think, not to be. If he couldn't have black mud in the middle of a forest, perhaps demon silk in the middle of a Ghost City would suffice.

He didn't quite dare act on it, but even just getting to sit still and obedient and quiet it was close second as far as comfort went. It was a greater comfort than he was often given. Red robes in front, and long, hanging red sleeves bracketing him, it blocked away the world. Hid the Gambler's Den, hid Ghost City, hid every other thing he might need to look at or think about, and it let him drift quietly in his own head. It was almost peaceful. The cold fingers that occasionally brushed his hot skin were almost peaceful too, when it wasn't painful. The way Ruoye was shifting and wiggling was almost peaceful as well, reassuring; he missed his friend when he stayed too still.

He would have happily stayed like that all evening, perhaps forever, but eventually the Ghost King spoke again.

"If you can move, you had better be working on releasing him." The voice was a low hiss, threatening and angry.

Xie Lian shuddered, fearful of what Ruoye was doing to draw the ghost's ire.

"Please don't hurt it," Xie Lian whispered.

"If that is gege's wish, then I won't," Hua Cheng promised. It sounded so solemn. So serious. Like Xie Lian was speaking real words that could have real meaning. He could feel tears prickling in his eyes again, entirely overwhelmed by the simple act of having his words acknowledged.

Time passed. Hua Cheng worked. He didn't seem bothered that Xie Lian did nothing but sit uselessly between his arms. Little by little, Ruoye seemed to have a bit more freedom, and Xie Lian's arms were prickling as skin was exposed to the air for the first time in longer than his mind could hope to remember.

And then the final knot gave.

And Ruoye was free.

Xie Lian was free.

That thought hung in his mind but it was so vast Xie Lian could hardly comprehend it. His arms were free. He could move his arms. *He could move his arms, which meant he could move his hands, which meant—*

He tried to do just that. Too quick. By now he should know better than to move quickly, it never did anything but hurt. His arms burned like lightning was racing up and down them, flaying the skin and frying the muscles and dissolving the bone. The sob that tore from his throat was entirely involuntary but also, somehow, a relief.

If he had the voice for it, he would have screamed.

He was free.

Cold hands were touching his arms, supporting them, moving them. Not forcing, not grabbing, not holding him down or pressing him into position or pushing him back and spreading him wide and—

The touch was gentle. It worked with Xie Lian, massaged the aching arms, and from the cool finger tips flowed a warmth that Xie Lian hadn't felt in eight centuries.

It was healing.

It was too slow.

His arms were just a function of his body. Two more strange pieces of flesh that felt disconnected and clumsy, stuck to his body in a way that had been meaningless for too long. What did it matter if they hurt or burned? What did it matter, when there was only one thing he needed them to do. Let the Ghost King do whatever he wanted after, but this singular moment was his, was just his.

He was free.

He would be free.

He had to be free.

His fingers scrambled against his hair, probing, searching, clumsy and uncoordinated but desperate, searching for the epicentre of pain that was hidden somewhere deep. It had to be here. It had to be.

But what if it wasn't? What if the nail was just a sick fantasy that Xie Lian's broken, dying brain had conjured up? What if there was no way to fix this? What if this was just how he was, the illusionary nail just an excuse for what he had become? So arrogant, so helpless, so —

"Gege?"

"Please. Please. *Please*. You don't need it, I'll do— please, I'll do whatever you want."

Even with his hands free he was useless. How long had he fantasised about Ruoye coming loose, of pulling out the nail, of walking free? But here he was, living that fantastical moment, and he was as trapped in this abyss as ever, if anything he could feel it closing over head, dark, suffocating, he couldn't *breathe*—

"— *gege, whatever you like*. What can this one do?" Hua Cheng was saying and Xie Lian could only cry. Pathetic. Desperate.

"Please take it out. Please. I'll do whatever you want without it. I'll stay. I'll be good. Just take it out." Anything, he would promise anything. Even lying on a dirty floor and being ruined again and again and again would be better, if only he could think, if only he could breathe and stand and speak without feeling bits of himself falling away. " *Please*."

His hands were pushed away, pulled back, and Xie Lian wanted to just throw himself to the floor and cry with frustration until Hua Cheng's hands replaced his, carefully parting hair and feeling the scalp beneath.

Until his fingers found it.

It hurt when the nail was jostled. There were no words for what it felt like when it was touched directly.

He could feel it move inside of himself. He could feel how it pressed up against and parted soft tissue. It was a feeling beyond pain. It was the feeling of a sword being driven past skin, deep and wet into a space that the body knew was never meant to be touched. It was the feeling of vital organs being speared again and again, until Xie Lian was nothing but pulpy, useless meat on an altar.

And then he blinked, and vision came back, and he was no longer on an altar dying by a hundred hands. He was curtained away from the world by a wall of red.

He tried to remember where he was and who he was and what was happening and why there was so much red.

The man was not here though and that was what really mattered. There was no room for the man in this small, safe space of red.

A hand was on the back of his head, but not a cruel one.

"This will hurt," said the Ghost King that surrounded him.

"Please," was all Xie Lian said, because he had no words left, the nail had shredded them. Please, at least, conveyed the desperation. Please what? He didn't even know at this point. Just, please. *Please*.

Whatever the word meant, it made the Ghost King move closer. Xie Lian was moved. He was pulled against the red-robed chest, his legs tucked between the ghost's, and a hand still rested against the back of his head. He was held down. Contained.

Xie Lian expected to feel the usual, vile heat and weight press against his groin. That he didn't was more confusing than anything. But his brain was hemorrhaging, thoughts were bleeding out, and emotions were gone. Not even disgust remained. Whatever happened, it was dissolving in black tidal water and a wall of red. If he was lucky, he may not even remember it, not when he was this vague.

"I'll be quick," said the Ghost King.

Please don't, Xie Lian thought distantly. So far the Ghost King had been slow and gentle. He would prefer it slow and gentle. If he was going to be pressed down, pierced by flesh, wrung out like a dirty robe over a washtub, then let it be slow and gentle. Just this once.

Except that wasn't what happened.

Xie Lian was pierced, but it wasn't by flesh.

Hua Cheng grabbed the nail. And pulled.

Xie Lian didn't die.

He wished he could.

He wished he was in the mud.

He wished he was on the hut's solid, stable floor.

He wouldn't even mind being pressed under the man, rutted against, because at least he was held down and still and experiencing a pain he could handle.

Metal was ripped half-way out of his brain.

It did not move cleanly.

The thin bone of his skull was scraped and rang like gong. Brain was shredded, dislodged, pulled out in damp chunks.

Not that he knew that.

What he knew was pain.

He *was* pain.

There was only pain, or something beyond that, bigger than agony, bigger than flesh, a whiteness that burned out everything else. He had only ever been pain. Nothing else existed. There was no world. No floor, no red, no men or ghosts or gods. There was no Xie Lian. There was pain. There was a singular entity that existed only to experience pain as lightning in its muscles shocked and misfired. It shook and flailed and writhed, under no direction of its own. It did not make those choices. It couldn't do things. The world was not its to affect. It shook and moved and thrashed. But mostly, it was pain.

Containment. Grabbed. Held, but not still, everything twisting, nothing belonging, a gaping hole filling with fluid that was drowning it without ever once touching its lungs.

The nail, again. Worse, somehow, than before. The nail was its entire world, the entire point around which it circled, and then it was nothing. It was gone. It was a hole, an abstraction, defined only by an absence. It was cold air against something hot and steaming and which was never, ever meant to be exposed.

It was pain crescendoing without ever reaching an apex, only somehow increasing beyond what should be possible.

And then it was nothing.

White became black became an absence of even that. Pain ended in a way that only death brought. The thing that experienced pain had become an intimate acquaintance with this peace over the course of a hundred years within a wooden box below the ground.

It was terrible. It was mercy.

It was better than what had come before.

Kinder, at least.

Perhaps this time it would take.

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